

Volunteers

If you decide to incorporate volunteers into any of the essential functions of running your program, it is important to take your time and to do so carefully. Before building a volunteer team, think long and hard about the infrastructure that is necessary to support them and how each of them can have roles that are effectively aligned with the organization's mission.

Volunteers are invaluable to growth and the sustainability of a program but it is important to recognize that creating and maintaining a volunteer program can be challenging and requires energy, time and resources. Unpaid staff are inherently less accountable because generally speaking, volunteers will contribute their leisure time (i.e. they may also work another job or go to school) and will not have as much training or experience as staff. Volunteers will require support, direction and management. A recruitment process is also necessary to ensure that we select volunteers that will provide committed support to the program and that will gain meaningful experiences from working together.

Staff

Though FoodShare's Good Food Box program relies heavily on the work and enthusiasm of volunteers, from coordinators to people who pack the boxes, its success also rests on the consistency and dedication of its paid staff. FoodShare has managed to create several stable jobs, but job creation has never been our main goal. To create even one job is very difficult. Though providing employment would be a worthy project in itself, the primary goal is to increase food access for as many people as possible.

Flexibility is a key attribute of our staff: everyone has to be willing to do everything, from going out to speak to groups who are interested in the Good Food Box to packing boxes, to changing their roles as the program evolves. FoodShare staff are also flexible in their hours of work, staying late as needed to pack boxes or make presentations, then taking time off in lieu to make up for this. Stress levels can also be very high due to the pressures of meeting deadlines and dealing with product or delivery problems.

FoodShare's preference is to hire staff from the communities that we serve (especially those who have shown tremendous dedication and leadership yet have barriers



to employment). These community members have the advantage of first hand knowledge of food insecurity and often can better identify the needs of the communities that we serve. If you decide to hire community members with growth potential, and you have the energy and resources to train them, you may choose to go this route. This may place a lot of pressure on the more experienced members of the staff, but it brings welcome diversity and sensitivity to the program. Ultimately, it's your choice.

Good Food Box Drop-off Coordinators

Community members coordinate Good Food Box drop-off locations and are responsible for placing the orders on behalf of the participants in their group. Coordinators must also collect payments, pay FoodShare, and coordinate the distribution of the full boxes to the participants when they arrive. Community coordinators play a key role in promoting the box and selling the idea to their neighbors. Ideally, volunteer drop-off coordinators are well connected and respected in their community, show strong support of the Good Food Box concept, and can offer reassurance of the quality and value of the pre-paid produce.

Volunteer drop-off coordinators have the satisfaction of meeting their neighbours and bringing good, healthy food to their neighbourhood. A free Good Food Box is also offered for every ten boxes that are delivered to their drop-off as a type of honorarium. From the point of view of the FoodShare staff, cost efficiency is best served when a large number of boxes are delivered to each location. It simply costs too much to make deliveries of less than ten boxes. To some extent, free box incentives help keep order numbers up, but we have also found that from an individual or agency point of view, numbers of not much more than ten boxes seem to be optimal. If a drop-off point gets too large for one person to coordinate easily, a good solution is to divide up into smaller groups of ten and recruit more drop-off coordinators.

Initially, coordinators usually phone in to inquire about the Good Food Box and how they can be involved. They are asked to recruit their own friends or neighbours to make a minimum order of five boxes. After that, they have the option of making their drop-off location “open” or “closed” to referrals. If the location is open, we will direct interested potential customers in the neighbourhood to it. If it is closed, we leave it up to the coordinator to recruit more members.

One issue to be aware of is that handling money can present particular problems to low-income people. Keeping a lot of cash in the house can be worrisome, and for people on social assistance, depositing it in a bank account can appear as though they are receiving extra income. Money orders and cheques cost money. One solution to this type of problem is for a neighbourhood agency to take the cash and then issue its own cheques.



Drop-off coordinator volunteer guide

As a general principle, it is good to implement procedures for drop-off coordinators from the very beginning. That being said, coordinators do need to feel that they have the ability to run their drop-offs in a way that is appropriate to their personal and community circumstances, to allow for some flexibility. Our tendency has been to be overly flexible (allowing coordinators to pay balances later, allowing customers to take the reusable boxes home, delivering a missing tomato, etc.). While this flexibility has its virtues, it can also threaten the very existence of the program by increasing administrative costs, or at the very least, by creating an uncomfortable level of chaos. See the appendix for an example of the information package we give to new coordinators.

Host sites

Host sites for the Good Food Box drop-offs vary from front porches, to co-ops, social housing buildings, daycares, churches, parent-child resource centres and community centres. It is helpful when a local agency can make a commitment to support the drop-off, especially by helping to find a substitute coordinator if the original one leaves. Although reliable ordering and money management are functions often best served by local agency staff, there is often reluctance from agencies because of staffing shortages. Agency coordination can also undermine the community development angle of the project. The best combination is when a community volunteer and agency staff person work together. Generally, it is not a good idea to distribute the Good Food Box through programs that attract people from a long distance – the box is heavy (it weighs up to 50 pounds) and most clients use public transit. Connecting people to a drop-off near their home is a better idea.

Host sites often work the Good Food Box into other programming, or use it as a take-off point for other food related programs. Agincourt Community Services Association in Scarborough is a good example of both. They started by operating a food bank, then added a Good Food Box drop-off site, community kitchen, skills exchange program and community garden. Participants are often involved in more than one program.

We have several agency stops that have a food bank. It has always been our goal to make sure that every food bank offers the Good Food Box as one option. But although this can be fruitful, it can also be problematic due to negative associations of food banks as being places for food emergencies and handouts and not places you go to for fresh produce.

There is also the problem of the cost of the Good Food Box. Although the Good Food Box can help a low-income family stretch a modest budget and increase access

to affordable, healthy food, the Good Food Box does cost between \$12 and \$32 and can be too expensive for very low-income communities.

Several churches in Toronto that also operate food banks have developed an innovative way to support low-income access to the Good Food Box. One church in particular increased the subsidy and covered an additional \$5 of each \$12 small Good Food Box, asking that customers only pay \$7, thus making it more affordable.

Packing Day Volunteers

FoodShare relies heavily on volunteers to pack and clean the boxes, maintain the warehouse and most recently, to help write the newsletter. Each week, at least 20 volunteers come to the warehouse to help with packing. Once people come a few times and find out that it's fun, they come regularly and the word begins to spread. We now have a large pool of more than 20 volunteers and therefore have created a volunteer schedule that ensures that there aren't too many volunteers on any given day and that there is enough work to make the experience meaningful and engaging.

The guiding principles for Good Food Box volunteer management are that volunteers deserve to be treated with respect, and that we should try to understand and consider their needs. Observation and interaction has led staff to the conclusion that volunteers help out for a number of reasons. It could be because they want to support a program they believe in, to get out of the house and counter social isolation, to give structure to their lives or because they need the free Good Food Box that is given to them as compensation.

Volunteer responsibilities and expected behavior

A lot is expected from volunteers, as well. They must go through a recruitment process (nowadays, there are more willing volunteers than spaces), show up on time and be prepared to work from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. A fair amount is needed from them physically (although not all volunteers must do heavy lifting).

A staff person with a strong personality and a loud voice is a great asset as a packing day coordinator. It is important that the coordinator maintains control of the situation, ensures that people are respectful to each other, that all volunteers are treated the same, and that everyone follows proper safety procedures. With good systems and equipment, FoodShare has found that 30 people can pack 1,000 boxes in six hours, with an hour for lunch.

Volunteers are seldom paid, not because they are worthless, but because they are PRICELESS!

Anonymous



Volunteer compensation

Volunteers receive a Good Food Box for helping out, though some give it away or donate it back to FoodShare. This system was introduced not so much as a way to encourage volunteering through some form of payment, as it was to recognize the economic reality of the many low-income volunteers who are involved. The free box is an “honorarium,” a token of thanks for volunteers’ highly appreciated and necessary contribution. A delicious and nutritious lunch is also served to volunteers during their shift.

Coordinating a Packing Day

Organization and strategic planning are key element to an enjoyable and productive packing day. Having at least 3 people per 100 Good Food Boxes will allow you to finish packing in about 4 hours. Preparing and posting on the wall packing posters that outline exactly what goes in each box is great for a quick reference. Setting up pre-packaging stations, where bulk food is divided into the appropriate portions ahead of time is also helpful. Newsletters and content sheets should be printed and snacks and beverages prepared, prior to each packing day.

Our packing day starts at 8 a.m. The produce is moved by skid and is placed 2-3 feet away from two 15-foot roller racks. On either side of the rollers, leaving room to walk in between, the skids are placed in order of the different levels of packing (for example: root vegetables at the beginning of the line, tomatoes in the middle and lettuce at the end).

While the assembly lines of produce and rollers are being set up, volunteers start to arrive between 9 a.m. and 9:30 a.m. They are welcomed, given name tags and given a moment to have a coffee or tea, wash their hands and say hello to other volunteers. The volunteers set up at the pre-packing stations where they start pre-packing the bulk produce into the appropriate portions. When all the items of a particular Good Food Box (7 different types: Large, Small, Fruit, Wellness, Large Organic and Small Organic) are ready, volunteers are set up in assembly lines and given an item or two to put into each box. Special attention must be made to make sure that each volunteer is given a job that corresponds to his/her abilities, strength and speed.

The staff coordinator calls out each item from the packing posters and makes sure that a volunteer accounts for each item. The staff coordinator reminds the volunteers that the produce must be handled with care and touched only by their clean hands. The coordinator also stresses that any produce that is of poor quality does not go into the box. The organizer then packs the first box on the line, explaining where each of the items go to maximize space, beauty and reduce spoilage and produce damage.

Two volunteers are asked to put in newsletters and transfer the boxes off the line and onto a skid.

The real trick of a packing day is keeping a large group of volunteers engaged and happy. This can be achieved by planning ahead. Decide on the order you wish to pack your different types of boxes and focus on finishing all the pre-packing required for those boxes according to that schedule. Once these items are pre-packed and the line is started, any additional volunteers who are not needed in the assembly line can pre-pack for the next box.

We give volunteers one fifteen-minute break and several short breaks as we organize the next line or stations. We provide fresh fruit, coffee, tea and water throughout the day.

Volunteers are given a “brief” or “pep talk” during each packing day, which orients them about safety and food handling issues and reminds them of the importance of their work. It also helps to give them a greater understanding of the principles, operation and ethics of the Good Food Box, by explaining where the food comes from, what the good deals are at the moment and what’s in season. If a farmer drops by, she/he will often take a moment to chat with the group.

Around noon, volunteers are invited to join the staff for a prepared meal. The meal includes the recipes from the week’s newsletter with the feature vegetable highlighted. Eating lunch together is one of the activities that help create the remarkable degree of camaraderie that reigns on packing days. Over time, volunteers have come to know each other, and there is a lot of joking around, singing and fun. There are now enough regular volunteers that they impart a sense of continuity and calmness to the proceedings.

FoodShare staff try to create an atmosphere where there is respect for the food itself – not allowing it to be thrown around or handled too roughly. The beauty of the food, and the sense of bounty created by a warehouse full of food can act as a healing influence on people who are undergoing a lot of stress in their lives. But, in the same vein, it is important that the volunteers feel they can participate in this bounty, by having the opportunity to eat and take food away with them.

When all of the boxes are packed and put into the refrigerator, the warehouse is cleaned up and the volunteers are given a Good Food Box to take home.

